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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SAAKASHVILI EXPRESSES CONCERN TO DAS
KAIDANOW ABOUT FUTURE RECOGNITIONS; DEFENDS NEW MOD

REF: TBILISI 1739

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. During her September 15 introductory call on President Saakashvili, EUR DAS Tina Kaidanow urged him to make progress on democratic reforms as a way to increase support for Georgia within the international community and shore up domestic stability, echoing earlier comments from VP Biden. Saakashvili expressed concern about Venezuela's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the likelihood of additional countries joining the chorus. DAS Kaidanow reiterated U.S. commitments supporting Georgia's territorial integrity. DAS Kaidanow also raised deep U.S. and international concerns about the potential danger and legality of Georgian seizures of ships in the Black Sea illegally trading with Abkhazia. She also expressed concern about the recent appointment of a new minister of defense in Georgia, Bacho Akhalaia, with a particularly bad human rights reputation; in response, President Saakashvili urged the U.S. to give Akhalaia a chance to prove his commitment to reform. End Summary.

RECOGNITION: VENEZUELA AND BELARUS

¶2. (C) A relaxed President Saakashvili, well-briefed on DAS Kaidanow's Tbilisi meetings the day prior (reported septel), was accompanied at this meeting by Amcit Advisor Daniel Kunin; DAS Kaidanow was accompanied by the Charge, EUR/CARC conflicts advisor Birner and A/DCM Fisher (notetaker). Saakashvili began by expressing concern that Venezuela's decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would lead to further recognitions, noting his belief that Belarus was on the verge of making its own decision regarding recognition and saying he hoped the West would act quickly to prevent this step. He claimed that Lukashenko "hates Vladimir Putin," which is why he refused to ban Georgian imports in 2006. Nevertheless, Belarus was under enormous economic pressure from Russia and would not be able to hold out much longer. DAS Kaidanow told Saakashvili that Belarus is an inconsistent and unpredictable interlocutor, but promised that the United States would do what it could to discourage recognitions generally and would confer with the Europeans specifically on the question of Belarus. She urged that any recognitions be met with a restrained response, and noted that EUR A/S Gordon had been clear in public remarks that Venezuelan recognition was not a significant threat to Georgian sovereignty.

¶3. (C) Saakashvili appeared less concerned about the possibility of recognition from African countries, but told DAS Kaidanow that if Belarus moved forward with recognition, Georgia would be unable to work with Belarus in the context of the newly created EU "Eastern Partnership Initiative" (reftel). If the EU did not expel Belarus from the Eastern Partnership, then Georgia would have to withdraw. DAS Kaidanow urged Saakashvili to coordinate closely with the EU

and not to take hasty action that could counterproductively damage Georgia's relations with the European Union.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE CONFLICT ZONES

¶4. (C) Saakashvili told DAS Kaidanow that he hoped the United States would not view the conflicts as permanently frozen; the situation, he said, would continue to be in flux.

The explosion in Zugdidi on September 14 was evidence of ongoing instability. To illustrate the type of pressure he believed the Russians were willing to exert, Saakashvili told DAS Kaidanow about what he considered to be a revealing conversation he had with then-Russian President Putin in February of 2008. According to Saakashvili, Putin had told him to "prepare himself" because it was clear that the West intended to recognize Kosovo. Putin suggested that if Georgia, at that time, were willing to forego NATO aspirations, perhaps Russia would not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Saakashvili maintained that Putin has ongoing challenges in the rest of the former Soviet Union due to Russia's tension with Georgia, and specifically mentioned increased Russian presence in Turkmenistan in recent months. He said, "Russia wants to surround us on all sides."

¶5. (C) DAS Kaidanow asked President Saakashvili for his views on how the United States and Georgia could implement concrete programs to re-engage people across the administrative boundary lines (ABL). Saakashvili urged a nuanced approach, saying he believed that permanent contact with the leadership in Sukhumi was important, but people-to-people contacts needed to be crafted so that they did not confer any elements of statehood on the de facto

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authorities. He claimed that in the past, he had blocked arrest warrants which some in the Georgian government had wanted issued against the de facto leaders, and said he was willing to do whatever he could to reach out. DAS Kaidanow told Saakashvili that the United States wanted to be consonant with Georgia in its approach to re-starting any U.S. assistance across the ABL, but pointed out that the Georgian government would have to address seriously some important issues, like that of permitting travel for Abkhaz residents on Russian passports. Saakashvili noted that he was unimpressed by EU ideas for opening an office in Sukhumi - such an action would send exactly the wrong signal and appear just like an embassy.

¶6. (C) Saakashvili expressed appreciation for U.S. support on a recent UN General Assembly resolution. DAS Kaidanow noted that Georgian flexibility on the language had been the key to its success.

¶7. (C) DAS Kaidanow raised the issue of Georgian ship seizures in the Black Sea, telling President Saakashvili that the United States saw the issues as a matter of serious political concern, even more than a legal issue (though she noted concerns on this score as well), and cautioned that such actions could easily escalate into something far more serious. Saakashvili avoided a commitment to stop the seizures entirely, but said that Georgia has been working closely with Turkey to prevent future sailings which violated Georgia's law and noted recent Russian statements which constantly painted Georgia as the provocateur. Saakashvili tacitly acknowledged the danger of escalation, saying "We would be crazy to get into such a confrontation."

REGIONAL CONCERNS

¶8. (C) Saakashvili told DAS Kaidanow that he viewed Turkish-Armenian reconciliation as a positive step and hoped that recent developments would encourage Armenia to move beyond Russia's sphere of influence. He said he expected short term fears to emerge from Azerbaijan but that the Azeris would be able to view improved relations as progress

in the long term. DAS Kaidanow agreed that the opening of Turkish-Armenian relations could have a positive effect throughout the South Caucasus, particularly on the economic development of the region.

DEMOCRATIC REFORMS: CRITICAL TO GEORGIA,S SUCCESS

¶9. (C) DAS Kaidanow told President Saakashvili that she had met with board members from the American Chamber of Commerce during her Tbilisi visit and they had agreed that the primary obstacle to further economic development was not the threat of Russia,s military presence, but a lack of progress on rule of law issues and concerns about domestic political stability in Georgia. She noted that the business community had specifically referenced the direct influence of the government in the judiciary as a hindrance to good government and rule of law. Saakashvili replied that Georgia's judiciary was less corrupt than others in the neighborhood, including Turkey's. He described Georgia's reform efforts as a "process." He said that Georgia has young, ambitious judges who are paid well, but they need further education and more exposure to the West in order to improve judicial independence. He noted that there was no longer any presidential involvement in the judicial appointment process.

¶10. (C) DAS Kaidanow asked how the United States could help empower Georgia's media. Saakashvili said that the Qempower Georgia's media. Saakashvili said that the fundamental problem is that journalists do not speak English and therefore were highly limited in their ability to research. He said Georgian journalists fundamentally misunderstood the role of a free press but he hoped further exposure to the West could help remedy this problem. He noted that during the protests the opposition had threatened journalists, and he reiterated previous requests for a USG-supported nationwide program of English language training.

NEW MINISTER OF DEFENSE

¶11. (C) DAS Kaidanow expressed concern about the recent selection of Bacho Akhalia as Defense Minister, noting his poor human rights record. Saakashvili immediately said he did not understand international criticism of his ministerial pick; as head of the prison department, Akhalaia had been responsible for tackling the mafia in Georgia, and as a result, Georgia had had more success in fighting organized crime than any other country of the former Soviet Union. Saakashvili went on to argue that former Defense Minister

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Sikharulidze had not made real progress on reform, that he had been a better diplomat than minister, and that he as President was obligated to hold Sikharulidze responsible for the attempted Mukhrovani coup attempt. Saakashvili urged DAS Kaidanow and other officials to keep an open mind regarding Akhalaia's appointment and he invited DAS Kaidanow to provide an assessment of his performance. DAS Kaidanow urged President Saakashvili to understand how this appointment had impacted on Georgia,s international reputation, and emphasized the importance of avoiding such actions in future.

¶12. (U) DAS Kaidanow has cleared this cable.

LOGSDON